

Women's Role in the First World War Patriotic Organisations

By Sherry Morris

During the First World War, women were not permitted to enlist in the armed forces. They joined patriotic organizations including the Red Cross League, the Soldiers Comforts Fund and the War Service Committee, to raise funds and provide comforts for the troops. Members of all these groups also organized welcomes to returning soldiers, decorating the railway station, meeting them and arranging cars for their transport home. All three organizations also met the trains carrying wounded soldiers through Wagga, providing them with cigarettes, coffee, cake and biscuits. They also visited war widows and orphans and the wives of men on service.

The Red Cross

The Wagga Red Cross League was formed on August 15, 1914 to provide funds for military hospitals, convalescent homes and rest camps for Australians abroad. Eighty women had immediately volunteered. Women held all the executive positions. The first president, Mayoress, Margaret McDonough, had to retire from the position when her husband retired as mayor and was replaced by the new Mayoress, Hannah Oates. The secretary was the very energetic and forceful, Mrs G. H. ('Jean') Kelsey. The vice-presidents were Elizabeth Copland, Mrs Lyons of 'Sackville', Forest Hill, and Mrs J. H. Foot (until she left Wagga in 1915). In 1917, Isabella Mitchelmore replaced Hannah Oates as the president. This was a major step forward, as the president no longer automatically had to be the mayor's wife.

Thirty to forty members attended the fortnightly meetings. They were nearly all middle-aged and middle to upper class ladies, wives of the town's bank managers, storekeepers, clergymen, stock and station agents, doctors, solicitors, well-off farmers and graziers. They included Emma Collins, Agnes Dobney, Mary O'Reilly, Lucy Shaw, Eva Copland, Nelly Leahy, Jane McGrath of 'Wattlevale' and Annie Fletcher of 'Walteela'. Other members included former matron Bee Bellair, hotel proprietor Annie Juppenlatz, Nurse Halloran, Miss Moran and Miss Sullivan, daughter of Stephen Sullivan, the owner of *The Daily Advertiser*. In 1917 the Red Cross League gained two of its most enthusiastic members, Fanny Meads and Mrs J. Muir.

The Red Cross ladies raised money through collection boxes, raffles, garden fetes, market days, bazaars and other fund-raising activities. Knitting needles were plied day and night; and the ladies met regularly to sew, pack and label the bales of clothing.

Each fortnight, the Wagga branch sent its contribution to the State Headquarters located at Government House where the articles were checked and then packed and sent to Britain or to the front. A sample bale contained the following: 21 pairs pyjamas, 47 flannel shirts, 28 pairs socks, 14 towels, 12 pads, 6 pairs slippers, 1 cap, 1 muffler, 2 mittens, and 2 sweaters.

Soldiers' Comfort Fund

The Wagga Wagga Soldiers' Comforts Fund was another group, which gave middle aged, middle to upper class women an opportunity to assist the war effort. It provided 'comforts' to Wagga Wagga soldiers serving overseas. By May 1916 there were 195 members and by the following August membership had more than doubled to 412. The president was the Mayoress, Hannah Oates. The treasurer was Bee Bellair until August 1916 and then Mrs F. C. Thomas. The secretary was Lucy Shaw. Some, including Emma Collins, Isabella Smith and Jane McGrath, were already members of the Red Cross League. The others included Louisa Emma Hartland, a storekeeper; Miss Bessie Loughlin; and Hannah Harriet Eyles (wife of merchant W. R. Eyles). By 1917 the president was Emma Collins.

Button Days, market days, euchre parties and dances were held to raise funds. By September 1916 thirty to forty women met each week in the large airy well-lighted room over the Commonwealth Bank in Fitzmaurice Street to make flannel shirts, tussore silk shirts, hankies, socks and chest protectors. At that stage they had 456 soldiers from the Wagga district on their books and by the end of 1917 had more than doubled this number. Parcels containing hand-knitted socks, flannel undershirt, soft towel, khaki handkerchief, soldiers' writing pad, tin of butterscotch, tin of tobacco, tin of cigarettes, packet of chewing gum, pair of leather laces and some bachelors' buttons, were sent to each and every one of them. Sometimes food items such as sardines, cakes, puddings, condensed milk, biscuits and dried apples — anything that would break the monotony of army food — were included. Often, the ladies enclosed personal notes to the soldiers. On one day, 240 parcels were packed. Boy Scouts used to help in the wrapping and dispatch of parcels. Bundles of newspapers were also sent each fortnight. At Christmas each soldier was sent an assortment of delicacies and presents.

The Wagga Soldiers' Comfort Fund ladies resisted all attempts for the establishment of a branch of the Australian Comforts Fund known as the War Chest Fund in Wagga. They maintained that they preferred to send parcels direct to men from the Wagga district rather than to Australian soldiers in general through the Australian Comforts fund. However, the Wagga Wagga War Service Committee did sell buttons for the War Chest Fund on their special appeal days each year.

In December 1917, the Wagga Soldiers' Comforts Fund amalgamated with the smaller Comforts' Funds in the district — Brucedale, Dhulura, Ladysmith, Pullitop and Yathella. Some of the names on the smaller funds were the same as the Wagga Wagga fund and amalgamation avoided doubling up. Wagga was the headquarters of the district fund. By 1918 some seventy to eighty ladies were packing parcels for the Fund in the upstairs room of the Commonwealth Bank.

Women therefore made a significant contribution to the war effort although still only permitted to perform traditional women's work — largely confined to fundraising drives, making clothes and sending comforts to their 'boys' overseas. However it had encouraged their participation in public life. They had established organizations and proved they could manage them effectively. They gained confidence in their abilities. This led to an unprecedented growth in women's organizations in the wake of the war

not only for the leisured middle classes but also for ordinary women who became more willing to become involved in public activities.



Red Cross ladies with one of the boy scouts who assisted them

Back row includes: Mrs Langlay, Mrs Ellis, Marie Blake, Mrs Charles Davidson, Dorline? Sullivan, Gladys Dunn Mrs Mick Raleigh, Lady Piddington, Ethel Booty, Vi Dunn, Maisie Hardy, Kath Dosbery, Win Fletcher, Kath Bradhurst, Jackie Higgs (England) and Aggie Maloney

Middle row: Bessie Loughlin, Enid Badgery (later Mrs Alex Davidson), Abie Sullivan, Aileen Irving, Ann Gowland, Rene Hinton, Miss Nash, Miss Harding, Mrs J. Jeremy, Mrs H. Hardy, Mrs F. C. Thomas

Front row: Mrs -, Vera O'Reilly (Mrs Forde), Thelma Angel, Marj, Headley, - Cameron, Miss Nash, Boy Scout, Rene? Ferguson, Emma Collins, - Cox



Above: War Service Committee selling buttons for the War Chest Fund on their special appeal days each year



Above: women fundraising in 1916

Individuals



*Above left: Emma Collins, worked for Red Cross and Wagga Soldiers Comforts Fund
Above right: Agnes Dobney*



Left: Isabella Smith of Kyeamba, well-known fund raiser and assisted with the packing of parcels for Wagga Wagga soldiers